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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001374

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [VT](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CHURCH CALLS FOR CLEAN ELECTIONS; CLASHES WITH BRV
OVER ASYLUM CASE

REF: A. CARACAS 000948

[1](#)B. CARACAS 001278

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Catholic Church is increasingly taking an active role in defense of democracy and human rights. In a September 24 press conference, Catholic Church leaders publicly urged all political actors to avoid any actions that might allow for the postponement of the November 23 state and local elections. Church leaders criticized President Chavez's 26 decree-laws issued July 31, calling them "unconstitutional." The Vatican also approved opposition student leader Nixon Moreno's request for asylum, prompting Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) leaders and state media to sharply criticize the Papal Nuncio and Church leadership. The BRV is unlikely to authorize safe passage out of Venezuela for anytime soon for Moreno, who has been residing in the Papal Nuncio's residence since March 2007. BRV pressure on the Catholic Church is likely to increase in the coming months as Church leaders continue to speak out. End Summary.

CHURCH ISSUES STATEMENT ON ELECTIONS, DECREE LAWS

[1](#)2. (C) The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) issued a statement at a September 24 press conference, calling on "all political actors, the government as well as the opposition, to avoid any action that could put in danger the carrying out of the elections scheduled for November 23." While rumors have been circulating in Caracas about Chavez potentially deciding to postpone elections in the face of unfavorable polling, there has been no word from any BRV official about a potential delay. The National Electoral Commission (CNE) has publicly stated that it is prepared for the elections.

[1](#)3. (C) The CEV also expressed formal opposition to the 26 decree-laws enacted by Chavez on July 31, stating that the laws are, "apparently unconstitutional." The CEV statement was signed by bishops from four regions of Venezuela, including Archbishop of Caracas, Cardinal Jorge Urosa. CEV Secretary General and Puerto Cabello Bishop Ramon Vilorio told Emboffs that Chavez's decision to issue the decree-laws during the middle of the summer allowed the package of laws to be enacted with little resistance. Vilorio also said Church officials planned to be outspoken in defense of democracy in the run-up to the November elections.

ASYLUM FOR MORENO APPROVED BY VATICAN

¶4. (C) The Vatican authorized diplomatic asylum for Nixon Moreno in June and notified the BRV in August, according to press reports. The student leader has been sheltered by the Vatican's embassy in Caracas for the last two years while seeking asylum. He was accused of attempted rape and of fomenting violence at the autonomous Los Andes University in the western state of Merida, but these charges are widely perceived to be politically motivated. The main rival of the student movement led by Moreno at the University was a "Bolivarian" student group led by Tarek al Aissami (Note: Aissami and Moreno faced each other in student elections in ¶2002. End note.). Aissami was recently appointed Minister of Justice and Interior.

¶5. (C) Venezuelan officials and state media have criticized the Vatican vehemently for this decision. Aissami, in statements to the press, said the Vatican should hand Moreno over to the BRV justice system in order to face trial and to "combat the impunity" that exists in Venezuela. President of the National Assembly Cilia Flores said in remarks to local press on September 18 that the Vatican's decision was "immoral" and that Moreno should, "pay for the crimes that he committed." Flores is the common-law wife of Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro, the BRV official with responsibility for authorization of Moreno's safe passage out of Venezuela, according to a statement by Interior Minister Aissami.

MORE BRV PRESSURE ON THE CHURCH

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¶6. (C) CEV Secretary General Vilorio also told us recently that the BRV has threatened to restrict funding for Catholic education, and state subsidies have decreased over the last several years. Church leaders believe the BRV is supporting the parallel "Chavista" Catholic Church (Ref A). The Venezuelan Reserve Armed Forces reportedly took over a chapel in the poor Caracas neighborhood of Petare on September 7 and the chapel's nuns were ordered to vacate. According to a protest communiquQ issued by Caracas Cardinal Urosa, the building will be used to train the "Youth Brigades of the Reserve" for children between the ages of 8 and 14. At a September 14 rally for the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), Caracas mayoral candidate and former Vice President Jorge Rodriguez criticized the CEV for not condemning the recent alleged coup plot against Chavez (Ref B).

COMMENT

¶7. (C) While Venezuela is not among the more traditionally religious societies in South America, the Catholic Church remains an important source of independent authority throughout the country, including in pro-Chavez neighborhoods. Church leaders periodically become more outspoken when they believe the government is threatening basic liberties. Last year, Catholic Church leaders contributed to the defeat of Chavez's proposed constitutional reform package in December 2007. As Church leaders continue to speak out in defense of democracy and human rights, BRV pressure on the Church, particularly Chavez's efforts to vilify key bishops and the Papal Nuncio, are likely to increase.

CAULFIELD